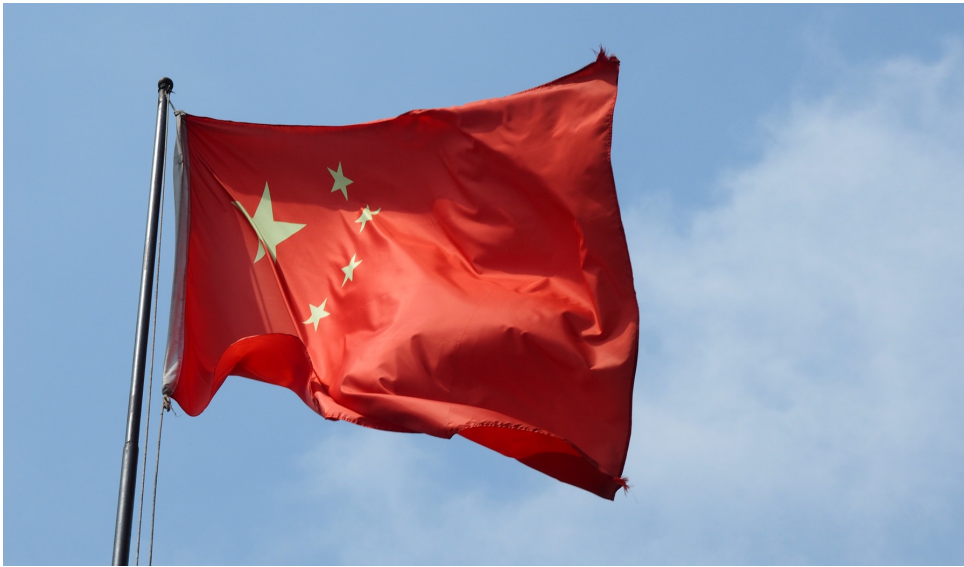




Exe-Xi-sis on Making China Great Again

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🕒 January 29, 2018 👤 Stephen Herschler 📅 2018: Vol. 17, No. 1

Post Series: 2018: Volume 17, Number 1

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Xi Jinping's 19th Party Congress Report

Just after the 19th Party Congress in October, when a second volume of Xi Jinping's Thoughts was published, I quickly moved to order my own copy through Amazon. Weeks later, still no anticipated delivery date. If I am to believe the website Stalin's Moustache, that's because Chinese citizens are voraciously buying up books by and about Xi Jinping Thought.

The recent 19th Party Congress may well require revising many previous publications. At the Congress, Xi followed Communist Party of China (CPC) tradition in presenting a Report (报告 *baogao*) to the 2,200-odd delegates assembled and to the nearly 1.4 billion Chinese citizens more generally. One thing that broke with tradition was the sheer length of his speech: 3 ½ hours. The length resulted in part from the CPC's comprehensive governance – implicating all facets of Chinese society. That's lots of ground for a speech – and the Party – to cover. Xi clearly felt comfortable claiming the verbal space, using it to map out a path to Make China Great Again.

Western press reports framed the event as Xi's fast-track enshrinement among the pantheon of great Chinese Communist leaders. The report championed the leader's trademark ideology, Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Special Characteristics, which has already been ensconced in the Chinese Constitution. This is notable as his predecessors, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, were inscribed only toward the end of their ten-year tenures, not mid-term.

More specific policy details will appear late 2018, at the 3rd Plenum of the 19th Party Congress. What the Report does, however, is set forth a general ideological framework legitimizing the policies to be followed over the next 5 years. That being the case, it is well worth our while to see what sort of leadership powers and prerogatives the Report confers upon Xi.

Measuring the dimensions of Xi's Authority:

Its height:

Xi not only has some good ideas; he already has "thought," which, in the CPC's carefully crafted lexicon means a higher, longer lasting active status in the hierarchy of Communist philosopher-leaders. Marx and Lenin get highest and longest lasting honors; they're "isms" (主义 *zhuyi*) as in Marxism and Leninism. Mao and apparently now Xi are just one step below, being "thought" (思想 *sixiang*). While Deng is officially only "theory" (理论 *lilun*), I'd still place Deng among the Chinese Communist demi-gods, for reasons explained below. Below them would be Jiang Zemin (even though he has "important thought") and Hu Jintao. Hence the authority denoted by the term Xi Jinping Thought.

Its length:

The relative authority of isms, thoughts, and subsidiary forms of thinking is determined by the scope of time and space the ideas cover. Marxism covers all time and space; Socialism with Chinese Special Characteristics primarily covers China after the founding of the CPC. Within Socialism with Chinese Special Characteristics, one finds more Communist Party guiding concepts deemed authoritative for some particular segment of time.

Accordingly, each Party congress report presents some clear marker of change, usually depicted in new slogans, which are tied to particular eras much as hit songs evoke distinct periods of one's life. Some such past "hits" include: Deng's Reform and Opening to the Outside World, Jiang's Three Represents, and Hu's Harmonious Socialist Society.

Attaching Xi Thought to a new era (新时代 *xin shidai*) affirms its long-lasting importance. More than just this season's hit, it's hoped that upon hearing Xi's new tune, generations of Chinese will exclaim, "Honey, they're playing our song!"

Its depth:

Undergirding all these isms, thoughts, and theories is a notion of progress, or rather of development (发展 *fazhan*). Indeed, the word pervades the 19th Party Congress Report, which flatly declares at one point: "Development is the Party's primary task" – echoing Deng Xiaoping's adage that "only development is firm reason" (发展才是硬道理 *fazhan cai shi ying dali*.) Perhaps to state the obvious, development is understood as moving forward along the socialist path, stage by stage, towards some better place. Progress is marked by reaching various "landmarks" along the way. The ultimate destination, communism, is some ways off. Better keep those seatbelts fastened as officially we're still only in the Primary Stage of Socialism which, according to Deng Xiaoping Theory, will last about 100 years.

The nature of movement along this developmental path differs depending on whether one is moving from phase to phase or from stage to stage. Phase-to-phase, denoting more minor forms of progress, can be characterized as predominantly quantitative change, that is, involving persistent incremental improvements over time. (Think Adam Smith: "the division of labor is limited by the extent of the market.") Stage-to-stage, however, involves a qualitative change, reflecting categorical transformations between epochs. (Think Karl Marx: feudalism replaces slavery, capitalism replaces feudalism, communism replaces capitalism – all through revolution.)

Xi's new era denotes that qualitative changes are required, not just more of the same. More specifically, key elements of Deng Xiaoping Theory can be set aside, not as illegitimate but rather as inappropriate for this new stage in history. As the CPC discourse puts it, a new era and its new goal bring with them a new primary contradiction, which means new struggles for the Party and the people.

It's all so new, and yet...

Two-timing and two-stepping in Xi's New Era

There's something distinctive about Xi's Report to the 19th Party Congress from the very start. At first, the official title fits firmly in the Party's standard framework:

Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society

Strive for the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Special Characteristics.

But then the Report's opening immediately reframes the goal as:

Struggle Tirelessly to Achieve the Chinese Dream of the Glorious Revival of the Chinese Nation (中华民族伟大复兴的中国梦 *Zhonghua minzu weida fuxing de Zhongguo meng*).

The Report, thus, presents two goals, denoting two framings that coexist throughout. The first goal focuses attention on the future, a socialist future. The second goal focuses attention on the past, a civilizational past. Xi's not just giving a Report to the Party Congress, he's leading a revival meeting.

Indeed, the Report lays out not one but two concurrent timelines: one of the Chinese people and the other of the Chinese nation. Xi's great power derives from him occupying

a critical strategic position in effecting progress toward long-standing historical goals for both China as state and as nation.

The Where, Who, and What of Xi's New Era

A new era denotes Xi's movement toward the status of Mao and Deng, each of whom is lauded as a progenitor of particular stages of history. Mao proposed the right guiding thought for an era of war and revolution; Deng proposed the right guiding thought for an era of peace and development. (Mao's "tragedy" according to the definitive Party account of the Mao Era, the 1981 *Resolution on Some Problems of Party History*, is that he failed to realize that war and revolution had given way to peace and development.)

This new era, says the 19th Party Congress Report, is still a time of peace and development. Xi doesn't break completely with Deng, as Deng did with Mao. Moreover, China is still firmly embedded in the Primary Stage of Socialism; it's still a developing country. The 19th Party Congress era (2017-2022) spans a 5-year period bracketed by centennial anniversaries of key Communist historical "landmarks" that will help frame stages and their significance in ways that tug at Chinese Communist civic heartstrings.

It is bracketed by, on the one hand, the centenary of the Russian October Revolution (1917) and, on the other, by the centenary of the founding of the Chinese Communist Party (1921). The centenary of the founding of the CPC coincides with the achievement of *xiaokang*, the concrete goal Deng set forth several decades ago: achieving a moderately well-off society (小康社会 *xiaokang shehui*), a developmental landmark declared by Jiang in 2002 as a goal to be reached in 2020. This goal shaped the polity's marching orders in the 16th, 17th and 18th Party Congress reports, framing the endeavors of both Jiang and Hu's rule as well as Xi's first term.

Now, however, *xiaokang* is so, well, last stage.

Xi's new era (新时代 *xin shidai*) is bounded on its outer limits by another centenary, 2049: the 100-year anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China. What will China find when it gets there? This is part of Xi's power: the ability to set forth an agenda for the next 30 years.

A New Goal for A New Era:

The goal, as trumpeted in the Report's title Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Special Characteristics, cannot be reached in a single bound. Rather, it requires an intermediary goal, each one separated by a distance of 15 years. Thus, on his big stage of history, Xi performs a 2-step dance: first, from 2020 to 2035, China basically achieves socialist modernization (社会主义现代化 *shehuizhuyi xiandaihua*); next, by 2050 for China becomes a socialist modernized strong country (社会主义现代化强国 *shehuizhuyi xiandaihuaqianguo*).

Both goals fit firmly within the logic of CPC developmental stages. A closer look, however, shows that the second melds with a goal that has saturated the Chinese psyche since well before Marx was even a twinkle in Chinese eyes, much less the inspiration for the CPC. This resonance comes forth in a full description of the final goal: a powerful socialist modern country that is wealthy and strong, democratic, civilized, harmonious, and beautiful.

Make that an Old Goal for A New Era:

The phrase “wealthy & strong country” (富强国 *fuqiangguo*) has been around a long time, wailed by Qing Dynasty scholar-gentry seeking to save the country (救国 *jiuguo*) from colonialism and imperialism of Japan and Western countries. Over 50 years ago, Benjamin Schwartz titled his book on Yan Fu, the Qing Dynasty official who introduced Spencer’s Social Darwinism to China in the aftermath of the Sino-Japanese War, *In Search of Wealth and Power*. Just recently, Orville Schell and John Delury saw fit to name their history *Wealth and Power: China’s Long March to the Twenty First Century*.

What we have here, then, is not a purely Chinese Communist goal. Rather, it’s a goal that harkens back to China’s initial encounters with Western notions of progress in late 19th century Qing Dynasty, when China was gripped with fear of civilizational decline that in time gave way to concerns about national sovereignty as Chinese worked to reimagine their polity, as Wang Hui expresses it, in *From Empire to Nation-State*.

This is where Xi’s speech sounds off-key if listened to expecting a pure Marxist dialect. Terms like “Chinese Dream” and “Revival of the Chinese Nation” just don’t fit with historical materialism, either in tone or substance.

But then the end of the new era comes in 2049, the centenary of the founding of the PRC in 1949, and that immediately evokes what 1949 marked: the centenary of: the commencement of the “century of shame and humiliation” suffered under imperialism and colonialism. This is referenced throughout the Report and evoked by the 2049 goal of building a 近代 (*jindai*) rather than a 现代 (*xiandai*) historical aspiration. Both terms mean “modern,” but each has significantly different connotations. Generally speaking, for Chinese historians, the *jindai* stage of history starts with the Opium Wars while the *xiandai* stage starts with the May 4th Movement in 1919. A *jindai* aspiration is a civilizational aspiration, a *xiandai* aspiration is a nationalist one.

Xi’s Creole Marxism: tradition, the people, and dreams.

The phrase, “great restoration of the Chinese nation,” rings odd relative to traditional Marxism in several respects. First is the very idea of China’s feudal past having anything worthy of reviving. Marxist history finds resolutions to present conflicts in the future, not the past. Under Mao, anything associated with the Four Olds of Feudal China (old customs, old culture, old habits, old ideas) was excoriated, even becoming the object of violent political struggle. Before he helped found the Chinese Communist Party, Chen Duxiu spoke for a generation of *New Youth* in his eponymously named journal when he railed against Chinese traditional culture.

Yet in the 19th Party Congress Report, we read of the wonderful things in China’s traditional culture:

“With a history of more than 5,000 years, the Chinese nation created a brilliant civilization, making remarkable contributions to humanity, and became one of the world’s great nations.” These too become part of the repertoire of resources for the CPC to draw upon, a part of Socialism with Chinese Special Characteristics. When saying this phrase in the Xi Jinping dialect (习近平话 *Xi Jinpinghua*), not to be confused with Xi Jinping Thought, remember the stress falls more on “Chinese Special Characteristics” than on “Socialism.”

What one sees encoded in the Report is China’s new nationalism, perhaps most clearly connoted in the double ways of referring to “the people.” The term “*renmin*” (中国人民 *Zhongguo renmin*) takes on a more civic connotation. When Mao Zedong stood on the podium at Tiananmen Square in 1949 to proclaim the founding of the PRC, he used this term when uttering the famous phrase, “The Chinese people have stood up.” (中国人民

站起来了*Zhongguo renmin zhanqilai le.*”) While Xi references a civic notion of “the people” throughout the Report, the term used in conjunction with past and future is (中华民族 *Zhonghua minzu*), which can mean Chinese nation and also Chinese ethnicity. Xi’s speech denotes a nationalism that is both civic and ethnic.

This brings us to a third word that has no place in conventional Marxist lingo: dream, as in China dream (中国梦 *Zhongguo meng*). Historical materialists don’t generally have dreams; they have plans. “Dream” brings to mind pejorative declamations from Marx like: “Religion is the opiate of the masses.”

This dream, however, has two reference points, one historical the other contemporary. The first is a 19th Century China debilitated by the scourge of imperialism and opium addiction. The second reference point: another dream that’s out there – the American Dream.

复兴*fixing*: A Middle Kingdom once more

While a rich and strong country has been a dream for some time, this dream now seems close to becoming a reality. Accordingly, Xi’s speech begins to revise China’s spatial imagining. As noted above, China officially considers itself a developing country. Much of Deng’s agenda was about development – again, “only development is firm logic” – but a development that was calibrated relative to other, more advanced (发达 *fada*) countries. China needed to develop at breakneck speed to catch up with (赶上 *ganshang*) the more advanced countries.

In Xi’s new era, the dynamic changes. Deng broke down Maoist autarchy when he called for learning from more economically advanced countries, including capitalist countries. His formulation placed China in apprenticeship to those countries’ practices. Xi’s Report affirms that in contrast to the former era’s focus on high-speed development, this new era will be about high-quality development. Previously, Deng emphasized developmental “initiative” (积极性 *jjixing*). Now, the emphasis is on developmental “innovation, creativity” (创新性 *chuangxinxing*).

Thus, development involves both the tangible and the intangible. On the one hand, the degree to which China is a “strong country” is readily measured through standardized criteria associated with “comprehensive national power,” criteria that distill down to hard power, good old realpolitik. On the other hand, part of being a “strong country” in this new era places added emphasis on intangible factors. Among those highlighted in the Report are civilizational strength as well as international influence, by which is meant not just diplomacy but the effective spreading and inculcating of ideas, such as creating philosophy and social sciences with Chinese special characteristics.

All of this requires the dogged, determined oversight and guidance of the Party in all domains of the polity. Nothing is to be free of the Party’s influence, even the Party itself – which Xi presents as critical to the success or failure of this historic, and historical, mission.

The 2050 goal is presented as aspiration not just for China but for humanity: “The era of striving to achieve the Chinese nation’s dream of China’s restoration, is an era of our country moving closer to the world’s center stage, an era of incessantly greater contributions to humanity.”

What Xi is setting up in the China Dream is an alternative to the American Dream. It is a move to present, if not a challenge then at least a clear alternative to the previous U.S. hegemony in the economic and ideological realm. In part the alternative presented is

one of systems – a socialist market economy as a coherent system, an organism distinct from – not subordinate to nor a perversion of – a capitalist market economy. One thinks back to Deng’s adage that both socialism and capitalism have markets. In part, though, it is presented as a civilizational difference, one rooted deeply in the past yet creatively competing for more market share in the future. In 2050, then, China resumes a version of its proper historical position, if not as *the* Middle Kingdom than certainly as *a* Middle Kingdom.

Xi-ing Double

Xi Jinping’s speech refracts in two ways, much like those 3D lenticular postcards – a.k.a. wiggle pictures – I loved as a kid. (You know the ones: at first look there’s the Cheshire Cat but shift your gaze just slightly and you see only its grin.) The 19th Party Congress Report, looked at one way, manifests a great Communist leader – a Mao or a Deng. Of course, we’re talking about the “good” Mao not the “bad” Mao. The Mao of Mao Zedong Thought, who proclaimed in 1949 atop Tiananmen Square: “the Chinese People Have Stood Up.” Not the Mao of the subsequent “20 wasted years,” in Deng’s blunt assessment. But tilt the card just slightly and another image of Xi appears: Xi as the latest of a line of great Chinese emperors, concurrently advancing civilization and keeping the barbarians in their place. As used with images, the process is called Xography. As used in reference to the text of the 19th Party Congress Report, let’s call it Xigraphy.

The CPC worked hard for much of the past century to keep these two images of Chinese leadership on two separate cards. Not always successfully, as I know from personal experience. Some 20 years ago, a grassroots official proudly told me that China had two peasant emperors. One hailed from his district: the founder of the Han Dynasty, Liu Bang. The other? Mao Zedong. At that time, his utterance produced a wave of angst amongst the other officials present, who were quick to interject that Mao wasn’t an emperor. Twenty years later, I doubt they’d be so concerned.

Indeed, Xi’s Report repeatedly calls not just for confidence (自信 *zixin*) in China’s current system but also in traditional culture. This is a China that, after nearly breaking its national neck when attempting The Great Leap Forward some 60 years again, now not only speaks of catching up in great strides (大踏步赶上 *databu ganshang*) but even of taking flying leaps towards glory, wealth and power (向繁荣富强的伟大飞跃 *xiang fanrong fuqiang de weida feiyue*).

Xi is known as a big fan of Chinese traditional philosophy, and in the Report’s conclusion, he sums up Chinese Communist and Chinese civilizational aspirations through a phrase known to most any student of Chinese history:

大道之行，天下为公

Where the “Great Way” (大道) prevails “all under heaven” (天下) is one community.

These words, from one of the four Confucian classics, the *Book of Rites* (礼记 *Liji*), and inscribed on Sun Yatsen’s mausoleum, can be found in traditional centers of Chinese communities around the globe. For them to be accorded a place of prominence in a Party Congress report – indeed, not just the final word but a final proverb! – creates conceptually a political dish that is strikingly retro nouveau.

In *Confucian China and its Modern Fate*, Joseph Levenson wrote of a China that, having failed as an empire, sought to reclaim victory as a country. It is said that reversal is the essence of the Dao. Flash forward almost exactly 100 years from Yuan Shikai’s farcical attempt at dynastic restoration in the Republican Era. Now we see China as country,

seeking to reclaim a status as empire. This time, the Great Way refers not to a Confucian Way (儒道 *Ru dao*) but rather the Socialist Path (社会主义道路 *shehuizhuyi daolu*) with Chinese Special Characteristics. Guiding China as nation state along the correct path through this new era: Xi Jinping Thought.

'Making Great Again' – what's lost in translation

Xi is far from only state leader pushing a mission of national revival. Across the Pacific, Donald Trump came to power on the phrase "Make America Great Again." There are resonances between their respective aspirations. Both evoke nationalist sentiments that are more ethnic than civic. Both forms of nationalist sentiments evince protracted conscious framing efforts made more impactful through strategic deployment of media resources. Both see restoring greatness as a fraught process, occurring in an international environment filled with grave threats as well as tremendous opportunities.

But one also finds striking differences in their respective formulas on how to make their countries great again:

One views the goal largely proactively, from the perspective of centuries.

The other views the goal largely reactively, from the perspective of only a decade, maybe two.

One vision upholds a unified nation by obscuring differences and repressing dissent.

The other vision asserts one nation over others by accentuating differences and demonizing dissent.

One Party declares it best can "serve the people" through state-led economic redistribution policies.

The other party avows people are best left to serve themselves, promoting laissez-faire and trickle-down policies.

One leader affirms government as a critical part of the solution.

The other leader attacks government as a critical part of the problem.

To paraphrase Mao, what we have here is a whopping contradiction.

Another difference, of course, are their histories and the distinctive flavors of cultural nationalism each can impart. In their efforts to define "great," each leader has a different pantry of cultural resources to complement the various kinds of civic and ethnic nationalism they're dishing. Whatever "nouveau retro" cuisine Trump may be serving up, I'm sure the list of ingredients doesn't include four Confucian classics, Maoist contradiction, or dragon tales.

All joking aside, as Xi and Trump would both agree, we see before us two very different recipes for becoming great again. Beyond simply affirming systemic differences, each intends to cultivate – even entrench – civilizational differences. More work needs to be done to compare and contrast their respective logics.

Fortunately, this being an exi-Xi-sis, not an exi-Trump-sis, I can keep this point provocatively evocative. Besides, key pieces of information – ingredients – have yet to be assembled. Trump's recently released National Security Policy (December 18, 2017) on

Making America Great Again has brought his vision into greater focus through some policy specifics, much as the Report to the 19th Party Congress' 3rd Plenum fall 2018 will do for Xi's agenda.

In the meantime, if anyone's got an extra ticket to Xi's show at the 19th 3rd this coming fall, I'll trade you a Xi Jinping chairman-emperor wiggle picture for it.

language

politics

society
